

LIFE AT GURNET

By Ben Kilgore

PLYMOUTH -- On Gurnet's Point, John Heffernan enjoys both a romance and a marriage of convenience with everything and everyone around him.

He and his family of 10 live in near-isolation on a 27-acre promontory approachable only by 4-wheel drive vehicles traversing rude wheel tracks across 5 miles of shifting, tide-swamped sand dunes.

Heffernan is pretty circumspect about his past, and on Gurnet's Point, he shares and cherishes the seclusion that Daniel Webster knew a century before in a small beachfront cottage not 300 yards from the Heffernan family's 250-year-old house.

Heffernan, 40, is sensitive about his obesity and a painful knee injury which has impaired his mobility for 10 years, and subsequently added weight to his frame, due to inactivity. But he has found himself on this remote outpost, cut off from the mainland, which gives him ample time for self-reflection and confrontation.

He and his wife of 3 years, Ethel, opted for the self-imposed exile of Gurnet's Point, a move which she said "must mean we're a little crazy. You have to be to live out here."

Despite the presence of 2 teenage daughters, the family has no telephone.

Electricity is provided by 2 6000-watt generators, which Heffernan can control from a switch in his bedroom.

Heffernan must drive the children to and from school, though this year, the family has a working agreement with one of 2 other families on the point to alternate transportation.

But usually, twice a day, Heffernan clambers in his International Scout Jeep and makes the trip to school with teenagers and pre-adolescents, all of which he inherited when he married Ethel in 1971. The couple has one child of which John is the father, John Francis, age 2.

Mary, 21, lives in nearby Duxbury. Her husband, John Lapchak, is stationed at the Coast Guard lighthouse on Gurnet's Point.

Heather, 19, lives with a grandmother in Quincy, but the rest of Ethel's children of a previous marriage live with the couple and enliven the household upon their return from Duxbury schools.

Norman, 18, works as a grocery store clerk in Duxbury and contributes a portion of his check (\$5 a week) to the family till.

Jimmy, 17, is the family "handyman," and attends Duxbury High along with sisters Ruth, 16, and Kathy, 15.

Colin, 11, Ethel, 10, and John William, 9, attend Duxbury primary school.

Gurnet's Point is territorially in Plymouth, but the children attend Duxbury school because they are closer.

Peter Stott, 22, of Andover, was stationed at the Coast Guard light, until last August, but he liked Gurnet's Point so much, he made a boarding arrangement with the family and handles many household chores that Heffernan's injury prohibits him from doing.

"It's a completely different lifestyle out here," Heffernan said, "but it's not what you'd call a getting back to nature trip. You have to be pretty self-sustaining and frankly, most people wouldn't like it if they lived here year-round."

The house, built in 1720 by the first keeper of the Coast Guard lighthouse, is heated by a gas furnace, which the family uses sparingly to conserve gas, and a Franklin stove fed by wood which Pete Stott splits on the chopping block outside by the hour.

Stott also works one day a week at a lumber mill in Duxbury.

Ethel, a good-natured, inquisitive blonde in her early 40's, shares an interest in astrology with her husband and they conduct an adult education class one night a week in Duxbury.

They perform astrological personality and prediction charts, charging \$60 for sessions which "sometimes take several days to do," Ethel said.

Their conversation abounds with talk of "moons" and "palaces" and the effect on character development of the same tides which make passage to the mainland impossible twice a day and which are gradually eroding the sand base of Gurnet's Point, which has diminished by 4

(Continued on Page 12)



After the storm, Dec. 2, looking
across Bluefish River.

LIFE AT

(Continued from Page 9)

acres in the last 100 years.

"The thing that impresses you most living out here," Heffernan said, "is just how insignificant you are in the total scheme of nature. You can see it when the tide comes rolling in and makes man a captive."

For the summer and yearround residents, Gurnet's Point is like a vacation paradise, but living there is not without its disadvantages and distractions.

Recently, for instance, a golden hippie calling himself Sun Ra (The Sun King) journeyed to the point to talk to the sea and to "purge himself of his sins."

"He said he had been sent here by God to take the confessions of the people out here," Heffernan said, "and he had a hickory stick which he said he'd use to beat them if they didn't tow the line."

Another nature seeker had tried to drive out to the point and

came to Heffernan's house "to see how we lived out here out of from society," he said. "I said, 'that's fine, I'll just sit down while my supper's hot,' but then he told me that he needed help getting his \$2000 Volkswagen out of the dunes."

The family's income is limited and of varied sources. The children of Ethel's prior marriage are provided for somewhat by the estate of her late husband, and Heffernan has some income from insurance for his injury, which required the rebuilding of a knee and ankle and the use of crutches for the rest of his life.

Teenagers Ruth and Kathy have occasionally voiced discontent about being out of the mainstream of their peers' social life. "but we still have friends back in Quincy (where the family lived previously) and in Duxbury too," she said, and John "the children address Heffernan as John takes us out if we're going someplace. Sometimes we stay with friends."

Colin, 11, plays classical piano without the benefit of sheet music to pass the time, but he, too, feels bored sometimes by the paucity of things to do.

Ethel and John realize the deprivations imposed on the children by their isolation. "but it's also a good chance for them to learn a different set of values," Heffernan said, "and they enjoy things out here that other children don't have, so it balances out."

"We do have television, but we try to limit the cartoons that they (children) watch. One good thing about this power system is that I can shut down the generator from

the bedroom, and of course, if there's no power, there's no television."

"It's not as difficult for my wife and I," Heffernan said. "We're not social butterflies anyway," though they sometimes entertain during the summer and on one occasion cooked a spaghetti feast for 130 people.

In addition, their love of astrology draws them together and makes relations easier with the young children and restless teenagers.

"It's much easier to understand each other if you know where that person is coming from," Ethel said, "and why they react the way they do."

Heffernan, who formerly was "in insurance" at one time lived in the Charles River Park apartments and he has had to "learn a lot of things I wouldn't have been able to do if there were someone else to do them," like priming a pump, and learning the routes in and out of Gurnet's, which have claimed many vehicles "driven by people who didn't know what they were doing. Someone lost \$7000 worth of car (due to the tides) just the other day."

"But one of the most beautiful sights I know," Heffernan said, "is to drive along that road when the freshly-fallen snow is glistening. It's indescribable."

If John Heffernan still lived at Charles River Park and looked down upon the honking, swarming, fuming cavalcade of traffic, he might see the sign that says, "If you lived here, you'd be home by now." He's glad he doesn't call that home anymore.